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ABSTRACT

The strategic and indirect use of language in academic discussions poses particular difficulties to non-native speakers of English. In order for English language teachers to address the needs of non-native speakers in this area, descriptions of how language is used by proficient speakers of English in academic discussions are required. This paper reports on the markers of detachment and commitment in speaking in discussions between proficient speakers of English in classes in a British university. Findings reported concern the linguistic devices used for marking detachment and commitment and their uses for specific interactional functions. These findings are explained in relation to the theoretical framework of politeness established by Brown and Levinson (1987). It is concluded that the native speakers in the discussions were expert in using markers of detachment and commitment to achieve precise interactive objectives. Students from non-English speaking backgrounds experience difficulties in attempts to achieve such objectives, and have trouble decoding such indirect uses of language. The contributions they make to discussions may come across as overly direct, abrupt, and critical. Thus, non-native speakers may need to be made sensitive to the conventional and indirect ways of interacting in discussions in English. (Contains 21 references.) (Author/KFT)

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Discourse in Discussions: a report of markers of detachment and commitment in Discussion in University Classes

By Helen Basturkmen

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The strategic and indirect use of language in academic discussions poses particular difficulties to non-native speakers of English. In order for English language teachers to address the needs of non-native speakers in this area, descriptions of how language is actually used by proficient speakers of English in academic discussions are required. This paper reports on a study into markers of detachment and commitment in speaking in discussions between proficient speakers of English in classes in a UK university. Findings reported concern the linguistic devices used for marking detachment and commitment and their uses for specific interactional functions. These findings are explained in relation to the theoretical framework of politeness established by Brown and Levinson (1987).

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1. Introduction

One influential theory of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) presents strategies as means of achieving politeness and politeness is seen as two-dimensional: *positive politeness* by which S (the speaker) makes H (the hearer) feel "his wants and personality traits are known and liked" and *negative politeness* whereby S attempts to mitigate the effects of FTAs (face threatening acts), such as impositions, on H.

Meanwhile, the term *hedging* is generally used to refer to the ways in which assertions or elements within assertions are softened, e.g. through the use of such lexical items as *almost*. The term has also been used to refer to the ways in which assertions are strengthened, e.g. through the use of items such as *definitely* (Holmes 1983, Brown and Levinson 1987).

It was Lakoff (1973) who first drew attention to the phenomenon describing hedging as words functioning to make things "fuzzier or less fuzzy." Lexical items such as *sort of, technically, strictly speaking,* etc. demonstrate that natural language portrays concepts as having fuzzily defined rather than sharply defined boundaries. For Lakoff, the main function of hedges is to indicate how true the proposition is seen and

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truthfulness is presented as two dimensional: 'true to a certain degree' and 'true in a certain respect'.

Prince et al. (1982) establish a dichotomy in hedging between *shields* and *approximators*. Whereas *shields* show the indistinctiveness of the speaker or writer vis a vis the truth of the whole proposition, *approximators* express vagueness within the proposition about element(s) of it, e.g. It's *kind of* expensive.

It has been suggested by Rounds (1982) that hedging serves three purposes: a means to articulate exactness of truth or falsity of a proposition, to indicate the writer's degree of commitment to a claim, and thirdly, to gain flexibility should, for example, later events or findings prove his or her claim wrong. Pindi and Bloor (1987) examined how economists modify their claims in forecasting texts. They identified the following strategies for modification: hedging; attribution and the specifying of conditions.

Hedges are seen within the greater context of *epistemic modality*, i.e. language functioning to express doubt and certainty, by Holmes (1983, 1988). Holmes argues that non-native speakers have particular difficulty in acquiring *epistemic modality* and as a result may appear as 'abrupt, didactic, rude or - even passionless'. ESL (English as a second language) textbooks tend to be misleading in their presentation of lexical devices for expressing doubt and certainty.

Hedges are seen by Stubbs (1986) as language by which speakers encode their point of view toward their utterances to show *commitment* and *detachment*. In a wide ranging survey, Stubbs discusses the kinds of linguistic items to which speakers may be committed or detached (propositional statements, illocutionary forces and individual lexical items) and also the linguistic means whereby *commitment* and *detachment* are realised.

There is a further dichotomy within this area - hedging can mark the speaker's or writer's sincere level of belief in the proposition (or part of it), or to demonstrate attitude toward the proposition for strategic purposes. Brown and Levinson (1987) address the issue of the strategic function of hedging. As a *positive politeness strategy*, hedging enables speakers to be vague about their own opinions and this reduces the possibility of disagreement with the hearer. As a *negative politeness strategy*, hedging functions to demonstrate minimised assumptions about the hearer's wants or what is relevant to the hearer.

Hedges can also be seen as conventionalised routines. Myers (1989) examines scientific written texts and working within the framework of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson, finds that hedges are used to accommodate the face concerns of the members of the academic community and that they reflect "the appropriate attitude for offering a claim to the community." The making of a 'knowledge claim' potentially threatens the negative face of the academic community and, therefore, writers alleviate such threats by hedging. A similar view is taken by Dudley-Evans (1993) examining hedging in written economics texts and who states, ".... generally when an original knowledge claim is presented, this is done through hedging, not because of personal doubt, but to show the proper respect for fellow researchers." However, in economics articles moves of *criticism* and *claim* which might, as 'face threatening acts' be expected to be hedged, were not systematically hedged and this, Dudley-Evans suggests, calls into question the argument that face threatening acts are typically hedged. The use of hedging and claim type were found to be co-related in economics research articles by Bloor and Bloor (1993). *Field central claims* (claims concerned with approaches to modelling and interpretation) tended to be *shielded* whereas *substantive claims* (those concerned with presenting results) were presented as bold and factual findings.

Other writers have recognised the potential of hedging to have more than one function. Biq (1990) in a study of hedging functions of the Chinese word *shenme*, proposes that hedges have a dual function: as a sincere disclaimer due to uncertainty about the proposition or, alternatively, as a rhetorical device to show the speaker's wish to disassociate him or herself from or even reject the proposition.

Hedging in written academic texts has attracted considerable research interest (e.g. Bloor and Bloor 1993, Myers 1989, Salager-Myer 1994, Hyland 1994). There has been limited interest in hedging in spoken texts (Brown & Levinson 1987, Basturkmen 1998, Channel 1994). The present study looks into the use of hedging in spoken texts in an educational setting, i.e. discussion in class seminars and tutorials in a university.

2. The Study

Assumptions and Definitions

Some assumptions underpinned the study. One assumption of the study is that the strategic use of language is motivated by consideration of the face concerns of the speaker for his or her own face and that of the interlocutor. Speaking in discussion is potentially threatening as speakers may appear to lack knowledge or understanding.

A second assumption is that hedging is major strategy. In the study, hedging is investigated under the headings of demonstrations of *detachment* and *commitment*, terms taken from Stubbs (1986). The terms markers of *commitment* and *detachment* have some similarity in denotation to the terms *strengtheners* and *weakeners* (Brown & Levinson 1987) and *boosters* and *downtoners* (Holmes 1983). Markers of commitment are defined as devices that act to emphasis or reinforce the illocutionary force and stress conviction. Markers of detachment are defined as items that act to soften or render the utterance tentative and to downgrade belief or association.

Data Description and General Procedure

The study reported in this paper formed part of a general investigation into discourse in academic seminars on an MBA program in a university in UK and the implications for the speaking syllabus of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses (Basturkmen 1995, 1998). The study entailed the collection of a corpus of texts of naturally occurring seminars and academic discussions which were then transcribed and examined for recurring linguistic patterns and features.

A corpus was collected of video recordings of seminar and discussion classes on the MBA course at Aston University, Birmingham. These recordings were of in-house lessons made for students on the MBA distance learning program. The participants were very largely native-speakers of English, some highly-proficient non-native speakers, tutors on the course and some guest presenters. The corpus was approximately 30,000 words and comprised eighteen texts selected from classes over a range of seminar and discussion type classes given by a range of faculty. The texts were of discussion in tutorials and in the question-answer sessions following presentations given by students or guest speakers.

The following symbols are used in the transcription of texts:

S1, S2	The beginning of turns of different speakers

The texts were surveyed and the linguistic realisations of detachment and commitment mentioned in the literature (Bloor and Bloor 1993, Holmes 1988, Pindi and Bloor 1987, Myers 1989, Rounds 1982 and Stubbs 1986) were identified and selected for investigation. These realisations included modifiers (*actually, obviously,*

etc) impersonal attribution, (e.g. *It is likely that ...*), If .... structures, other agency attribution, (e.g. *as you say)* and one type of realisation not mentioned in the literature - personal attribution, (e.g. *I think, I suppose*). The latter included modalised self attribution, (e.g. *I would say, I would agree*).

Scope and Aims

The investigation is limited to *shields*, i.e. speaker attitude toward entire propositions, and focuses on the strategic functions of hedging. The survey is restricted to verbal realisations although it is recognised that this strategy may be realised kinaesthetically and prosodically. The aim is to identify when and why speakers use hedging and choose not to present their propositions as factual but use indirectness or overtly make reference to speaker attitude.

The aims of this paper is to consider

- *The interactional uses of markers of detachment/commitment*
- *Aspects of speaker or hearer face concerns in relation to the use of these markers*

Markers of detachment and commitment are identified by examination of the texts and in consideration of features mentioned in the literature and reviewed in the previous section. The objective was the examination of the strategic uses of these markers and to offer explanations of specific uses.

3. Commitment and Detachment in Discussion

This section discusses the findings, namely how, where and why speakers encode commitment and detachment to their propositions in the discussions. The effects the speaker may envisage this encoding may have on the interlocutor and on the ensuing discourse are considered. Although, it is recognised that markers of detachment or commitment may simply have the function of simply representing the speaker's view of the truth of the proposition, the survey will seek out strategic explanations.

3.1 Detachment

The focus in this study is on markers of detachment in interchanges: i.e. questions and responses. Markers of detachment occurred with great regularity in questions and would appear to have a number of strategic interactional uses. Three areas in which the strategies of detachment were observed were: in counter proposals in questions; offering new ideas in questions or responses and in disconfirmation in responses. These uses are now discussed and exemplified.

Counter proposals in questions

Actually, really & in fact: requesting reconsideration

example 1
S Was *actually* the role developed with the European market in view or was it specifically developed first for the UK

example 2
S: When you talk to the people you want to sell your products to do you *really* adopt the same attitude when people are selling to you so you're like integrating up the river how about downwards now do the 2 things *actually* match in ==

According to Leech & Svartik (1975: 201) *actually* is an adverbial conveying the speaker's comment on the content of what he is saying. In example 1, the speaker uses *actually* in a question. In a statement *actually* may indicate a strong commitment to a proposition. For example, if I say, *She actually knows the answer*, I'm proposing that she knows the answer and I'm claiming her knowledge with some certainty. However, beyond this denotation, *actually* often follows on from some previous argument or discourse and indicates a dialectic stance. This is exemplified in the following extract from within a presenter's turn at talk:

example 3
" === we have made an effort to involve them not to think of them as second class commodities that can be brought in but *actually* thought of them as the key workforce who are we try to lock in as tightly as we do our key managers"

Actually, really, in fact and like items occur regularly in questions in discussion. They function to make tentative a form of counter proposal in the ensuing proposition, rendering it into a request for interlocutor reconsideration. In a question, such as *Does she actually know the answer?* we suspect that in the prior discourse, possibly discourse which was at a distance from this question, that the other speaker had claimed or implied at least that she knew the answer.

Let us consider options for making a counter proposal in semi-formal dialogue. Should a speaker wish to return to a proposition given by the other speaker previously and 'question' the validity of the proposition (in example 1, the presenter had emphasised the European orientation of the company's marketing approach), one option would be to frame the question as a negative polarity form, e.g. *Wasn't the role developed basically with the UK market in mind?* But this would appear as overly direct and challenging and potentially risky for S. Alternatively, S could form a positive polarity question such as *Did you develop the role with the European market in view?* But this would look very strange, even ironical, considering that the other speaker had previously made statements to the opposite effect. By using a marker of caution such as, *actually, really,* or *in fact,* S offers H the opportunity to re-consider his or her claim: Do you really think X? Clearly this is tactically a better course of events than a direct challenge: it is not particularly threatening to H but above and beyond that S avoids the risk of making a counter proposal and potential failure of it.

If we look at how the discourse unfolded in example 1, we see that P's response is a denial and he reiterates his former position. It is indeed fortunate that the questioner had framed his question in such a detached and tentative way.

'S-out' clause: showing criticism

In the excerpts below, hedges of the softening or distancing type are used within particularly critical turns. In the first excerpt, S2 is suggesting that H has been wrong

in analysis or made a poor suggestion about selling techniques which would lead to '*insulting*' the population. In the second excerpt, S3 talks of the other group giving '*far more*' stress to technology and uses a negative polarity form. In both cases, the strident tone of criticism is 'softened' by markers of detachment - *perhaps* and *seem*.

example 4
S Do you think speaking to them in their own language therefore insulting them that they're still from the third world is *perhaps* the best way to sell to them?

example 5
S1 The previous group *seem* to have far more stress on the technology importance than yourselves didn't you feel that as a factor?

S2 I think I think it's irrelevant .....

Examples 4 and 5 make it difficult to accept the idea that speakers mitigate the potential offence to the hearer of face threatening acts by hedging which is the argument of Brown and Levinson (op cit: 161) simply because if you wish to *soften* criticism you need to do a whole lot more than insert one softening word into an otherwise critical comment. However, a self face protecting motive can account for these instances of hedging: S makes his/her own proposition more tentative, making it into more of a suggestion, a batting around of ideas, thus establishing an 'out-clause' for S should disconfirmation (as occurs in the example 5) follow.

If structures: indicating the 'potential' problem

Writers' use of conditionals to hedge their claims has been discussed by Pindi and Bloor (1987). Conditional constructions are fairly frequent as a distancing device in questions in speaking also. In the excerpts below the speakers use conditional structures and they appear to function to critique a prior claim or inference made by the other speaker.

example 6
S1 You mentioned the family experience *if they're actually trying to tran to sort of have a transitional period between the family experience and the people who are already there would that not turn them off bringing kids in* ?

example 7
S Does that include an allowance for those items that aren't shown because they're actually consumed by the producers themselves because *if you do it in terms of value added at market prices if somebody produces something and uses it himself it's not actually going to show?*

If-clauses are used in questions to indicate the possibility of a problem in H's previous argument. They function to make a non-threatening (for both sides) form of counter, a 'potential' critique, and prospect genuine reconsideration rather than denial, and this is illustrated in the extract below, which is the next turn from example 6 given above:

example 6 cont.
S2 Well we talked about that and we suggested that they had like time of day differences so typically you offer mothers with young children perhaps an 11 to 1 lunch or something like that and a 5 to 7 special so that you didn't actually Americans have strange eating habits in the sense that they tend to have this happy hour thing and they all go in for about 55 cocktails on the way home so you'd have to be careful that you didn't have overlapping experiences

Offering new ideas

There are a number of ways in which speakers in discussion are cautious and distance themselves from the propositions they make when offering a new idea, perspective or information either in questions or in responses. Two means of distancing were observed to be: stress of S's personal but detached association with the proposition and framing opinion as question.

Stressing S's personal association with the proposition

Reporting the sudden idea

One ploy of speakers in seminar discussion is to report the idea that is 'running through their minds', i.e. an idea so sudden that the speaker can disclaim some responsibility for it. This is particularly evident in post presentation discussions when a speaker wishes to introduce new information or a viewpoint that was not covered in the presentation itself. The following examples illustrate:

example 8
S Can I ask um how much more successful the recent new range of 200 400 and 800's have been and have you got an indication of the sales *it seems to a lay person such as myself* to be significantly better than anything Rover have ever produced ?

example 9
S Are you thinking of going back in um because *it strikes me that* just at a time when you are getting your products right you just well pulled out a couple of months ago and especially the 800 coupe was tailor made for the UK US market and it's all over Is that something?

example 10
S5 Yeah um perhaps I'm going off at a slight tangent but *I just think* that the core capacity clearly that Avon have in the door to door type selling and direct selling approach to marketing and I'm wondering if really if *one thing that's going through my mind* is can they expand that area to take advantage of eh some of the more expensive brands

Self attribution

The commonest means by which speakers demonstrate caution and distance themselves from the propositions they make is a somewhat paradoxical combination of self attribution and modalised forms such as *I would say or I would think.*

Example 11
S *I would agree* with that um Alan but I think they probably would have been hit less severely by the recession had they anticipated it and changed their structure somewhat they inevitably their figures would have gone down but perhaps not so dramatically *I would suggest*

Example 12
S Air Data would be market driven *I would say* rather than technology driven because there was a basic need

Some of the forms of self attribution evident in the texts were as follows:

I don't think / I don't actually think / I'm not sure
I suppose/ I suspect that/ I expect/
I think it's fair to say / As far as I can figure out
I would think / I would subscribe / I would say / I would suggest / I would argue
I must say / And I have to say
I would agree
I don't know that I necessarily agree with / I would disagree .... I would say / I want to disagree/
I'm afraid I'm a little sceptical
I don't know

The suggesting of ideas and new information is potentially face-threatening. To mitigate this, the speaker could use impersonal constructions such as *It would seem* or *It is possible that.* The making of impersonal propositions even when framed with modality is far from safe. However, what we see from the above examples (11 and 12) is that speakers drawing attention to their own involvement in a proposition (through self attribution) and in this way make it more difficult for the other speaker to strongly disconfirm his or her proposition than an impersonally formed one. Example 13 shows S2 reluctant to directly disconfirm a proposition given in the form of self attribution:

Example 13
S1 I'm just curious about door to door selling I would think it's going to become really passé given the fact that you can ring a bell and not find anyone at home because people have to work

S2 Certainly door to door is looked at as a down market side but there will be a segment there whether you want to continue to position yourself to meet that segment is obviously a strategic question

Framing opinion as opinion seeking

Another marker of detachment is use of opinion seeking, e.g. a *Do you think...?* preface to a contribution of a new idea/information. Expressions such as *do you think* add tentativeness of the speaker's proposition. The speaker asks the other speaker if he or she thinks that S's (i.e. his own) proposition is true. Responsibility is firmly placed at the feet of the other speaker. Instead of S saying *I think X*, and *Do you agree?*, he distances himself from the propositioning role by asking the other speaker if he thinks the proposition X. Example 14 illustrates two means by which the speaker distances himself from the proposition he is presenting (opinion seeking and modality) and demonstrates S's ability to evade conversational responsibility for his own action of proposal.

Example 14
S So *do you think* there *may* well be a wider shift then than previously seen alongside decentralisation and divestment and divestment from the big

groups getting rid of *do you think* that *may* well change they *might* start taking on?

A bald or potentially self face threatening question concerning the same proposition could be:

> I think there will be a wider shift than previously seen alongside decentralisation and divestment as the big groups get rid off but that again will change in time and they will take on again do you agree?

A further means of detachment (and self protection) was seen in 'other agency attribution.' In this strategy H, is asked not *How do you answer my question,* or *Is this your idea?* but *How do you answer X's question?* This asks H to debate with a non-participant. It puts H in a particularly weak position and allows S to make an especially critical proposition in relative safety. See example 15

> Example 15
> S Can I just come back in with another question it's really just to turn all this on its head and *ask your comments on the sceptic's view* of this partnership purchasing which is the big companies dumping on the small companies and not accepting or really passing on all the responsibility and not paying for it and that's sort of under the difference of cultures between the Japanese approach and the UK approach which we've already talked about how do you answer that challenge?

To surreptitiously input information

Positive politeness is defined by Brown and Levinson (1987) as strategies to indicate to the hearers that they are members of the in-group and people whose wants and personality are known and liked. Some micro level strategies identified with this are the use of in-group identity markers, presuppositions of common ground and of H's knowledge, and including both S and H in the activity

Asserting the Commonality of S and H knowledge

The following excerpts show S's tactic of inputting information as if H already knows it:

> example 16
> S How do the market value the shares though I mean I can
>
> P BP is *obviously* a quoted company which we are not we have an internal market which is w use to have a share shop where people just listed the want

to buy shares sell shares and a buyer and a seller get together and agreed a price we are now starting an internal market run by our merchant bank

example 17
S1 Was actually the role developed with the European market in view or was it specifically developed first for the UK

S2 By the time we came to developing Rover 200 which *of course* is in collaboration with Honda as well um we were looking to a European European market not to the extent that we look today a total European market but certainly taking into account the European market by the time we came to marketing it we were definitely looking at a Pan-European strategy

In example 16 we see paradoxically a strengthener, *obviously*, brought into play to make a proposition in a detached way, by showing the information as commonly held knowledge of S and H. In example 2, P states that BP is *obviously* a quoted company and so presents it as a 'known' rather than as factually.

Suggesting the propositions are H's ideas or information

Another form of S distancing is exemplified in the following excerpt. It is a ploy to attibute the ideas to the interlocutor.

example 18
S Right right and I think that brings the question specifically as as it is asked there of saying what policies could be be used and what its consequences would be so *as you say* one thing we could do to actually reduce overall demand and that will mean that the demand for imports will go down .... one of the things *you could suggest* on the basis of what you were saying was raising tariffs

Disconfirming

Personal attribution

It is certainly possible to find instances in the data to support the idea that weakening hedges or caution are used to mitigate offence to the other speaker when committing a face threatening act and are thus motivated primarily by consideration of hearer needs (Brown & Levinson 1987). One place in interaction where this typically happens is the disconfirming response following a confirmation seeking question. In the example below an outside speaker is answering such a student question:

Example 19

S1 What was the competition doing was that taking in exactly the same stance that you taking?

S2 I don't think I mean to be honest I've not been that close to the advertising certainly going back 3 or 4 years but *I don't think* this pan European approach is really very common in the motor industry at the moment

Example 19 illustrates a number of tentative devices in S2's response. Firstly, I will discuss *I don't think*..... It is surprising is that S2 frames his response as opinion here rather than fact, although he is the marketing director of the company being discussed – he must know the facts and doesn't need to give opinions which the choice of *I think* implies. Nevertheless, he uses opinion framing instead of information stating as a way to hedge and distance himself from the disconfirmation. This softens the disconfirmation and disconfirmation framed as opinion is less face threatening for H than disconfirmation by a factually presented proposition.

In S2's turn in the previous excerpt, a second 'hedging' device, *not really very* is used. It seems almost nonsensical that the speaker uses both a marker of detachment or caution, *not really*, and a marker of commitment, *very*, together. But in interactive speaking this mixing of strengthening and weakening devices is fairly common. P is attempting to distance himself from his role as holder of expertise and is using two hedges together to emphasis that he is just in the business of giving opinions with the underlying consideration of preserving H's face.

The investigation into the strategy of detachment has shown that various forms of this strategy are used. They are largely defensive and concerned with speaker and hearer face needs. However, by examining detachment in specific places in interaction (e.g. the use of if-clauses in questions) the study has attempted to identify specific purposes for their uses.

3.2 Commitment

Markers of detachment are a common and expected feature of discussion. A less expected feature and a feature of language which has been less explored than detachment, is the use of markers of commitment. In the following section, these markers are examined to identify both their place and function in discussion.

Refuting counters

One rather predictable location of markers of commitment is in apposition and following on from criticism or counters in questions. In the extract below, P re-iterates his previous stand and re-inforces it with *not at all.*

> Example 20
> S1 What effect did the fact that the vehicle was a Japanese derivative have on the difficulty you must have had evaluating that Rover that traditional English mark was there not a conflict at all there that the that the consumers will perceive it?
>
> S2 ..... so the fact that there was a Japanese connection there is *not* causing a problem *at all* in trying to promote the Rover product ....

It is to be expected that the level of criticism in a move may be countered by the level of criticism in the follow-on move by the other speaker. This is seen in the above excerpt.

There are times when S puts across a message very strongly following counters as illustrated in the extract below:

> Example 21
> S1 The previous group seem to have far more stress on the technology importance than yourselves didn't you feel that as a factor?
>
> S2 *I think I think* it's irrelevant you don't need it you don't buy a television on the basis of technology *I don't think* you buy dry cleaning on the technology *I think* you need to keep up with it because if they get well down their competitors can use it against them but *I don't think* it's important as a mechanism for gaining market share or maintaining market share

One function of *I think* or *I don't think* is to add a cautionary note to the claim of the speaker. However, in example 21 this is not the case. If we re-formulate S2's response above without any modality or markers of attitude, we would get:

> It's irrelevant you don't need it you don't buy a television on the basis of technology you don't buy dry cleaning on the basis of technology you need to keep up with technology because if they get well down their competitors can use it against them but it isn't important as a mechanism for gaining market share or maintaining market share

The second version appears more neutral than the first. In the original version the claims are framed so as to be directly accountable to the speaker. This direct link of claim and speaker makes it difficult for the other speaker to counter again as to do so would be confrontational. This example indicates a use of commitment which, I suggest, functions to make unlikely further direct counters on this topic from the interlocutor. The idea was suggested earlier that use of personal association with a proposition makes it difficult for the other speaker to then directly disagree. This is again evident here. We see in the example that the hearer changes from his first line of inquiry and turns to a more general and open question through topic modification:

> Example 21 cont.
> S1 The previous group seem to have far more stress on the technology importance than yourselves didn't you feel that as a \\ factor
>
> P2 *I think I think* it's irrelevant You don't need it You don't buy a television on the basis of technology *I don't think* you buy dry cleaning on the technology *I think* you need to keep up with it because if they get well down their competitors can use it against them but *I don't think* it's important as a mechanism for gaining market share or maintaining market share
>
> S1 So what's their competitive advantage?
>
> P2 Quality the service they provide and the people they employ how they provide the service at the front end of the business

Indicating saliency

Markers of commitment were observed as functioning to allow the speaker to mark points of particular saliency, firstly through the use of the expression *I mean* and,

secondly, through a number of devices which indicate the short answer with response turns.

I Mean

Like the expressions *I think* and *I don't think, I mean* is a very frequent item in seminar discussion. A number of explanations can be found in the literature to account for the use of *I mean*. Coulmas (1981: 9) reports on "fillers" in conversation which give the speaker time to formulate what he or she will say. Edmondson (1981b: 277) explains the expressions *I mean* and *you know* as 'gambits' or 'interactional lubricants' having no illocutionary significance. Edmondson and House (1981) talk of *underscorers* which are a means of drawing attention or highlighting a point the speaker is making in a turn at talk to ensure hearer attention. Williams (1988) sees the function of *I mean* in business meetings as 'to explain'. For Scarcella and Brunak (1981), *I mean* and *you know are* expressions which make the addressee a more active participant. Schiffrin (1987) sees the function of *I mean* to show speaker orientation toward his or her own talk, i.e. modification of ideas and intentions and indication of commitment to a position. Schiffrin maintains that material marked by *I mean* is likely to be interpreted as highly relevant and to which the listener should pay particular attention. The following examples from seminar discussion contain the expression *I mean*:

example 22
S So how would we *I mean* this is a typical situation from the very beginning how would we know what you want because it doesn't seem logical to me to do it that way because ....

example 23
S What I was looking for is some kind of comment not on the sort of capital value of what they've bought or anything like that but the way in which they've had to put together a future business plan *I mean* do these things fall into any kind of coherent plan at all?

example 24
S Well it's interesting you raise the shirt laundering issue because you were at the risk of being controversial slightly dismissive of the first question that said how do you choose a dry cleaner one principle criteria is one that launders shirts and *I mean* there's quite a big difference between laundering

a shirt and dry cleaning it most dry cleaners don't launder shirts and that's the major selection point for me I would have my shirts laundered normally but I wouldn't have them dry cleaned

In examples 22 and 23, *I mean* appears to be functioning to indicate modification of intentions: in example 21, S starts off with an information seeking question but then changes intention to a statement of complaint and likewise in example 2, S starts off asking for *what I wanted* but inserts *I mean* when he modifies and shows his commitment to asking direct questions. In the third example, *I mean* indicates what Schiffrin terms 'commitment to a position' or saliency. In example 24, S's stance is that dry cleaning and laundering are different concepts and he marks this stance with *I mean*.

Saliency and the 'short answer'

Turns at response may be quite lengthy, e.g. there may be a number of supporting acts. As a result, it may be difficult for hearers to identify a specific reply to their elicits among the bulk of acts in the response turn or for speakers to clearly mark their specific reply in the response. Speakers tend to give long answers but may also give a short, particularly salient answer marked with commitment within the long answer and this salient 'short answer' was seen to be marked in the following ways:

Lexical repetition of the items in the question.

Example 25
S1 Did your employment strategies vary with the various sectors that you serviced and if they did are there any *distinctive patterns* that emerged

S2.....(very long turn) ... the *distinctive patterns* which I notice really are certainly the changes among ....

Yes or No

Example 26
S1 Yes eh your pan European advertising policy then has it been say to take a video shot in UK and then dub in into various languages is that it or how is your strategy been what have you actually done

S2 Right if we shot a film in UK and then tried to dub it into European languages that's what our marketing manager would have me call marketing for Warwickshire that's what they didn't like *no* the whole point is to start with the research programme which .....

Personal attribution

S1 ..... Do you think that may well change they might start taking on?

S2* *I think* it will change yes yes because the other strategic ====

* This response illustrates the 3 markers of the 'short answer' proposed, i.e. lexical repetition, the use of *Yes* and personal attribution.

4. Concluding Remarks

This examination of markers of detachment and commitment in questions and answers in discussion discourse has shown various ways these strategies are used for a range of a diverse interactional purposes, e.g. the use of if-clauses in counter-arguments giving interlocutors opportunity to reconsider views.

The native speakers in the discussions examined were expert in using markers of detachment and commitment to achieve precise interactive objectives. However, students from non-English speaking backgrounds may however experience difficulties in this (Basturkmen 1998). Non-native speakers experience difficulty in decoding such indirect uses of language and the contributions to talk they make may come across as overly direct, abrupt and critical (Basturkmen 1995, Preston 1989, Thomas 1984). Non-native speakers may need to be sensitivized to conventional or indirect ways for interacting in discussion in English. It is hoped that the description of strategic language use based on analysis of naturally occurring talk discourse offered in this report will be of value to language teachers and materials writers in developing language teaching materials and pedagogic oriented descriptions of spoken English language.

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